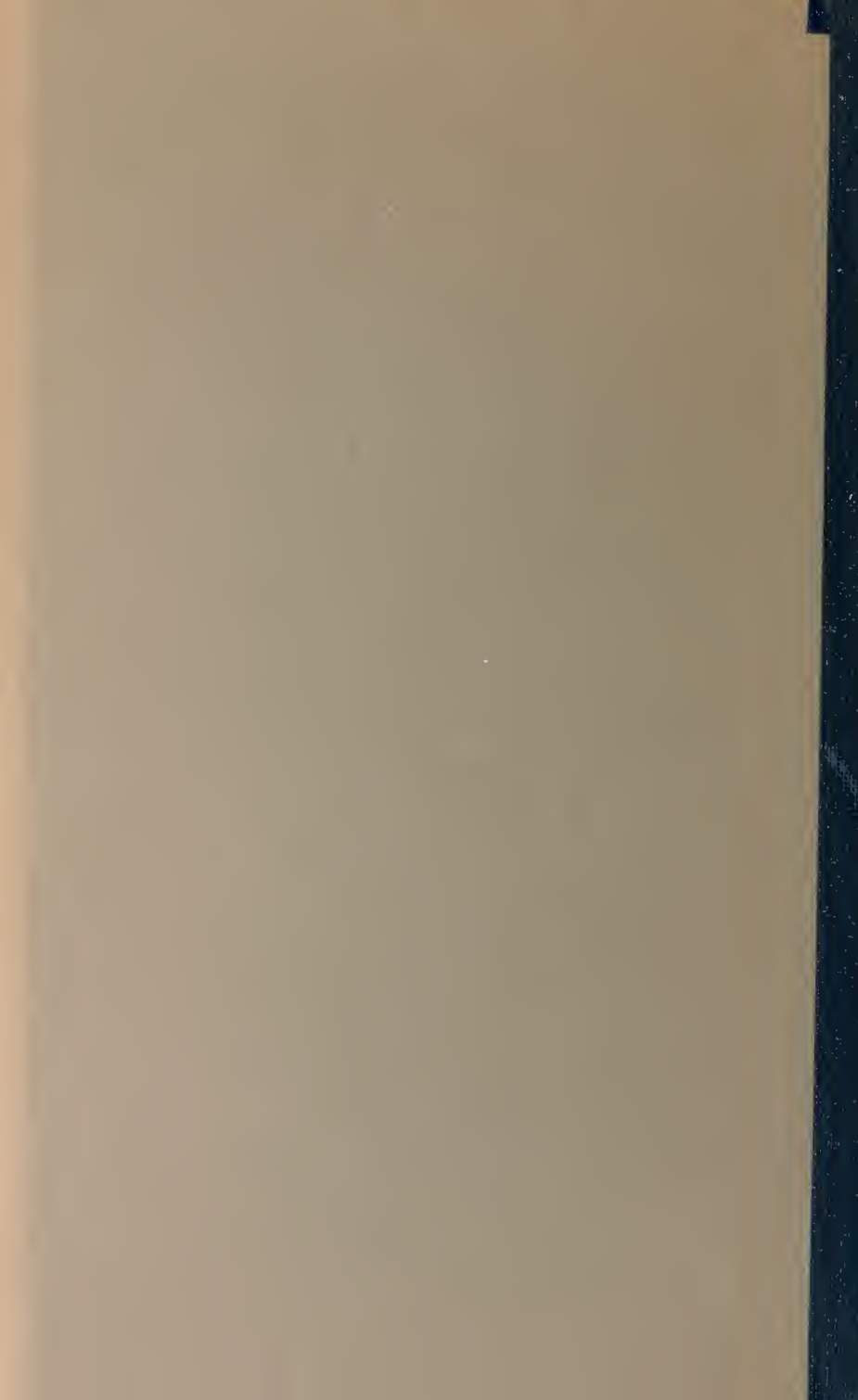


Adams, Percy Miller
Song of the scorpion

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SONG
OF THE
SCORPION

by Percy Adams



SONG OF THE SCORPION

a book of satire



By

PERCY ADAMS

Author of "The Hull And The Grain"

PHANTOM PRESS

Toronto

P5
B5D
D3556



12-11-67
C. C. C.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To "LABOR",
(Washington, D.C.) for "The Ear Of The Sloth", "Profit And
Loss" and "The Monkeys' Election".

To The Reader:

The aim here, with few exceptions, is not to write for the tower-dweller but for the people with the hope that they will understand without the aid of an interpreter. If it be counted less than art to do this, I shall still be happy about the whole affair. Grant me a tiny corner in the human heart and the world can keep the oyster. While satire may not be to everybody's taste, it is nevertheless true that its underlying goal is human betterment. Lastly, the worth of a poem is not to be assessed by turbot-eyed critics but by its appeal to the individual reader, who is the final judge and, to me, the one that matters.

Percy Adams

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THE TOAD AND THE LOUSE

He drowsed before the picture tube,
Nor sensed the change of scene
When the bleat of commerce ended
And a toad came on the screen.

The quiet woke the sleeper
Who gaped in unbelief
While the reptile donned his glasses
And rearranged his brief.

"I was once a politician,"
He announced in heavy tones,
"And, like you, a lawyer also
With dishonor in my bones.

"Now you see me serving durance
For my surreptitious schemes
And the deeds that fouled the prospect
With the smoke of voters' dreams.

"My talents grew upon me
And with mortgage funds to spend
I glittered in the sunshine
Till I met a grievous end.

"The world was ripe for plucking
And I reached without remorse
Till it chanced that I was bitten
By an undertaker's horse.

"The doctors rushed to save me,
Still the poison had its way
And the wretched process ended
When I popped up from the clay.

"My former colleagues loathe me
When they see me in the dust,

For I live on grubs and insects
Now that gold has turned to rust.

"My soul long since exploded,
Like a bubble in the mud,
And the judge I ate at Christmas
Is still swimming in my blood.

"Oh, brother-politician,
Though your guile may charm the House;
Can't you see black horses dancing
At your rebirth as a louse?

"Tune me out and let me wander
Where no scruple ever shows;
There'll be tongues adrip in toad-land
When you come to plague the rose."

POLITICS

Misled by this man's pose and that man's shout
To douse the sunrise and confirm the doubt,
Nor marshal wit to counter wisdom's rout.

FREE SPEECH

Somewhere ahead lie adult lands
Where justice walks with fame
And ill decrees go down to dust
In the archives of shame.

T.K.O.

'In God we trust', the coin declares.
The left hook takes me unawares
And fogs my wits. I lift my eyes
And groggily apologize.

MISSISSAUGA RATTLER

And the angel spake from the lookout:
 "Behold, one cometh as a serpent;
 the sun hideth its face in the clouds
 and knoweth the hour of frustration,
 and the birds and the flowers lament
 for him that hath all yet hath nothing."
 Book of Light

INDICTMENT

Look!
 See how they spill from nature's maw
 and ground in the shoals;
 dwarfs in the delta
 dipping dripping values
 from the silt at low tide:
 genius immersed in the gumbo of frustration,
 poets plucking stringless lyres,
 writers on a leash,
 singers on a cracking bough,
 dancers aquiver in death throes of grace,
 dramatists bearing odors,
 politicians braced in the rut,
 big wheels with locked brakes
 sitting at the light;
 multitudes of gapers
 silhouetted in a world afire,
 nor reaching for a hose from womb to tomb;
 yeas and nays polishing with allegiance
 the facets of existence
 that picture the retreat from Jerusalem.

Unfold the blazoned sheet;
 behold the bumpered avenues of iniquity:
 crime, lust, rackets, auctions on the jetty;
 man in His image coursing waters

flagreed with the blood of Jesus.
Movie moth in the spotlight,
world leaders in the wings till crisis screams
and the monster rears
and the lost tribes teeter
and the altar trembles
and the tears of the Lord
run down the stained-glass window.
Passions mauling nature;
detonations in the north,
detonations in the south,
poison in the bone
and the mouth of posterity.
Reports from Arabia:
wares shrieking to infinity,
eager hordes plodding sand
to green the bailiff's future.
Cafeteria:
gossip, rumor, scandal, fashions, comics, puzzles,
aid for the witless;
adults absorbed with whizzing discs,
clouded spheres and clutched ovals;
mass acclaim;
death on the ropes,
encore.
Muffled thunder from the masthead:
giants mouldering,
truth on a tether,
dwarfs in the hollows of achievement.
Low skies in the casino,
kites moving earthward,
rust on the rails,
austerity's dull blade crumbling the cake,
abortion in a green skirt, weeping,
soothsayers stammering;
after the descent the patched balloon.

Culture's brigands raiding the fireside:
fusillades, ricochets;

barroom rhapsodies —
music from the hip;
bodies,
sanity ambushed.
Praise the arts
and toss a mask to Beauty
gasping in the reek.
Agitation in the pond:
hucksters' bait and drama's lure vying;
what but the straining fish can disentangle
violence pills villainy floorwax,
virgins on the verge,
fisticuff shair oil rescue soaps fade out filter tips.
Play of the week:
Stale cake between drinks,
excursions in the groove.
Blessed is the click.
Spare me seclusion,
aroma of pine,
friends in the wild
and a sweet-flowing stream.

Footlights:
glitter, curves, sheathing,
fare without pith;
females with wits atwirl
feasting —
fricassee of vanity,
goblets of envy;
captive males squirming,
critics wedged in the exit.
Hit of the year:
Dame Art with a syringe —
rutting in the woods,
stag and hind ecstasy,
true love achieved in a canal movement.
Puppets cleaving to a frayed line
knotted to a pay cheque.

"Our text this evening . . . "

Relax, eager one:

seek not the oat in the barren manger.

What dwarf spitteth out the gag

and stirreth up the people?

The throng is on its own,

like children darting into traffic;

the crossing guard was expendable.

Pray and beseech;

the heavens open not;

tomorrow the urgent foot and clutching hand.

Rejoice! dark prince, and stuff your ears

with crackling music and the coins' jingle;

cram them till your skull is riven

and the desecrated temple falls

and you, forever, lie beneath a monument of rubble.

Let the bright ones disperse

on the edge of learning,

shoulder into leadership

and be the heaviness of history.

Tremble not for the mother lode;

the paltry dime assures title,

yet none will be trampled

and few found missing from the tents of ignorance.

To each according to desire and capacity,

but beware of dusty tomes;

ethics are as friction to the drum.

Free-wheeling speeds arrival —

mansion or penitentiary.

Compose the remnants with music;

the disc goes round the clock.

In the cool of the dark

and the heat of noon

the pitch will be as ice cubes in the blood.

Shelley, a din has stormed the memory;

soft voices sank in the ooze

when jazz broke surface.

Bookrack:

crawling harvest —

weevils in the wheat.

He who feeds and retches not

has no problem of selection.

Behold the measure of the dwarf

who plops down a manhole

and comes up with diamonds —

and insults to God on the hilltop.

Critics whisper among themselves,

like hypocrites apologizing to angels,

deploring the worn trumpet

and the lost rebel note;

but not out loud,

not with the virtue of reveille.

The ear of the ass is sharp

and the guillotine has edge also.

What of the twilight?

Is there one clear flame,

one heavened voice that makes for love and reason?

He that serveth a lie

shall be as a howling dog

at the gate of the City.

We who dwell in hovels of unworthiness:

we who clutch the bribe

and renounce the just intolerance,

we who build a palace

and shut our ears to the shelterless

and our eyes to the last day;

we who flinch and tremble

and bear false witness,

we who turn aside

and align not our feet with the radiance,

yet may astonish our souls

and prepare an honest brief

as we approach the rim;

and acknowledge before the court

that with the sun in the way

we failed to see the light.
Wherefore shall lies deliver us
when the deed is graved in fire on the mountain-face?
But stay, who is knocking at my door at this hour?
Could be the fist of conformity.
But this knock is gentle,
as though all the love and kindness in the world
were seeking entry with soft insistence.

Light of my life!
Come in, Jesus.
Surely the flowers of springtime
will envy the welcome
only the breast may offer.
You must be tired, Master,
such a far journey;
hitch-hiking, too, I fear.
The strange thumb in a miscreant world
begets the aching arch.
Do sit down and let me wash your feet.
You'll be safe here in the secret ventricle
and well provisioned with the loaf of love
and the wine of sincerity.
The high priests of the shadows,
who believe not the bud till it opens,
will not dream you passed the barricade
even as amber music filtering through the haze.
Lord of the divine answer!
We must confer together.
We in dwarfland who aspire
to focus sunbeams on the haunts of darkness
are like stray fireflies making brave in a blackout.
Do not be perturbed by the night sounds.
What you hear is only the serpent
hissing threats to a few insurgent dwarfs
protesting the demolition of a cathedral
to make room for bomb shelters.

SILENT NOTE

I went to see him just before the end —
 A man of probity without a friend,
 Who spent his essence to enrich the thought
 Of those who stumble where the light is not.

I burned to ask him why a barren field
 Should rate devotion when no faintest yield
 Had prospered courage or inspired the will
 To raze the fortress on the bitter hill.

He sang of justice with a rebel throat,
 Which banned to silence everything he wrote;
 For darkness governs in a dagger age
 That stabs the beauty and befouls the page.

A thousand questions went unasked that night
 When the heavens parted for a mercy flight.
 And so a world that failed to recognize
 His worth, still wonders where the wisdom lies.

COMES THE RAIN

Down through the years they come and go,
 Seeking the bread the toil supplied
 When they marched with the strong till, lo,
 The vigor drained, the brightness died
 And they, frail shapes, were thrust aside
 To wither in the somber glow
 Of sunset years bereft of pride
 And sink from sight in tragic flow.

How wan the prospect and the dream
 Which once made music in the heart:
 Rich hopes that fueled the eager gleam
 And urged the hand to play the part;

Prosperity, success and joy —
All that the effort could attain —
Was theirs to strive for and employ
To fend misfortune come the rain.

Dismayed, the shackled angel stands
And serves the throng. The cold demands
Of ruling aims reduce the fare
To crust and crumb for those who share
The austere bun of charity
And view the riven parity
Of stored abundance like to rot
Lest those who have will profit not.

Who benefits when beauty dies?
What man of stature shall arise
And counsel us to dare the deed
That pleasures God and meets the need?
Sad Lincoln freed the chattel slave,
But who will stay destruction's wave:
This force within that crucifies
The Christ in us and spares the lies.

9

BLIGHT ON THE CORN

I saw a land beset by troubled seas,
A hollow chieftain steeped in ways outworn
Pursuing custom's course and veiling pleas
To nourish roots which suckle barb and thorn;
Tall men who were in thrall to tuneless strings,
A multitude that tilled a fertile field
While chill winds blew and swooping vulture-wings
Foretold a hunger that rebuked the yield.
Too much too long, but not of precious will
To cultivate the soil where beauty flowers
When head and heart aspire to seed the bill
And gain the sceptre from defaulting powers.
How like a withered crop in autumn's frame —
A harvest lost, a glory dimmed in shame.

ECHO

Whose lyre shall tell of scented hours
 While on the stage chaotic powers
 Distress the scene and mock the prayer
 With images that leer and stare
 At humble works of honest men,
 Which find no crown. The ingrate pen
 But writes them off to round their days
 Deep in the red of painful ways;
 So that plumed thieves may ride the breeze,
 With eager shears and supple knees,
 To sun-bold heights and there display
 The fleece of lambs that came their way.
 So did Rome revel and contrive
 To drug the bee and loot the hive
 Till vengeance swarmed and reason's gate
 Swung wildly in the blast of fate.

11

said the oracle

Pillars and props:

let us congregate in the hustings,
 like swarming bees in search of clover,
 and listen to the drone of wisdom —
 to those who prophesy of grazing in rich pastures
 and aspire to apportion twitch-grass and dandelions
 for the next five orbits of the sphere.
 To each according to his ability to discriminate,
 to reap or nibble and to secure.
 You know how enthusing it is,
 being fat in experience if lean in wherewithal,
 even unto the proportions of the hippopotamus
 and the gaunt hyena.
 In passing, let us, out of an overflowing heart
 and the sides of our mouths,
 bestow moral support on the patrons of the queue;

'tis better than bread and the belt tightens easier.
But be of bright spirit;
if humans have erred and preyed,
the sea is incorruptible and the good earth also.
Only the laden hook and vacant platter
speak with heavy countenance.
Let us, then, in this bewitching hour
again embrace the winning hag of custom
and hock the sovereign will to the highest bidder;
let us pass up the humbugs and grab the peanuts
and affirm the rights of the elderly
to bask in hovels and poke merrily in the garbage
for five of the best sunset years.
Let us lift up the hearts of the money-lenders
and the buccaneers of the upper deck —
patriots all, and steeped in the ethics of the stone tablets.
We who live above the fog and the need for navigation —
charting the course by the holes in our underwear —
will get by, like grandfather did,
on the gleanings that fell off the hayrack.
Let those of small heart and little stomach
consult the history
and take hope, while it lingers,
in the thirty-year flight of the golden balloon
ere it pops out on another peak of human achievement.
Let us preserve our mental molars from the hard core:
let us stop up our ears to the rich in leisure
and abolish the insidious handout,
which burrows, like a ghosted rat,
a route to the granary of virtue.
Let us purge the blight that parches the bloom of corporations
and shrivels the root that suckles the shareholder.
Profit, not sharing, is the cream of our lives
and butters the bread of those who have it.
Let us snip the leash on enterprise
and the country will prosper
even though events may tremble the mountains.
You with the gleam and the noble desire:
court with honor and diligence

the enticing wench with the green lustre;
the understanding will arrive in salvoes
when you sprint for a fox-hole.
But, as you envy the louse its stature,
beware of tomes and thoughts that probe;
walk in the cool night
and let the sunlight blister the unwary.
The bliss of the clod outspans the cord of silver,
but the wit of the learned is sharpened to misery.
Harken not to agitation for a welfare state
except for senators
and a few battalions of V-I-Pees,
who require striped trousers to foil the tax bite.
Let no false tongue betray you
to process sacred cows and come up with porterhouse.
Let us have more bombs and fewer hospitals and schools
and places to lay our heads.
Let your allegiance to custom and tradition
be as rock that is denser than the matte of Sudbury
and as watchful as party scrutineers;
for this is the fealty that makes what you see
and keeps it beautiful.
Fear not the heaven-borne missile,
but erect a shelter with prudent embrasures
that you may assist the chance survivor to paradise
with a buckshot send-off.
Then only shall you come to know the joys of Crusoe —
the splendid isolation and the heavenly scope —
till he discovered footprints
and peace took off like a screech-owl.
But come, proud followers of a riven unity
and a drifting balloon,
let us mount the ox cart while darkness holds
and creak to the polls
before light breaks from the prairie to far corners,
and the structure with the built in feature
sighs out in the bog of obsolescence
and we, too, make with bubbles.

BALLAD OF A BERSERK VOTER

From voting day to voting day
For blinkered years his loyal hand
Made bird-foot marks — the dullest jay
That ever spurned a greener land.

He shunned the page that offered light;
His grandsire willed a fateful tune
While spectral hopes danced in the night
That hid the hook and banned the boon.

He honed no scalpel to relieve
The pressure which besieged the core;
Tradition bound him to believe
The lathered word forevermore.

The treadmill where he earned his bread
Ensured the hunger of his kind.
“The chief is pleased with me,” he said;
“I follow him that leads the blind.”

Through war and peace and boom and bust
He pecked at life like other jays,
And paid allegiance to unjust
And minted rule that stole his praise.

Far up the slopes that hemmed him in
A mansion stood, half in the sky;
“I, too,” he said, “endorse the sin;
I’ll have one yet before I die.”

Not till the locust came to dwell
And spread its blight throughout the land,
Transforming plenty into hell,
Did rebel voice assume command.

“O bloodied gill! I’ve been a fish;
The barb is in my craw,” he said.

"I hear a snap, and heaven's wish
Achieves new balance in my head.

"Hand me my torch of lunar white!
Away with suckerdome desire!
I storm the cage of Moscow night
And free the bats with holy fire!

"No more the poor shall rob the rich,
No more the hope shall snare the throng;
I now perceive a wily witch
That rides the world to do it wrong."

Forthwith he took a flaming brand
To smite the meek ones of the plain
And battled with a wilder hand
Than earth shall ever see again.

The sun stood still to blink and stare,
The dungeons split with mad applause
And hell itself moved up to share
The aims of this outstanding cause.

Morticians prospered where they stood
And all the rest reworked the mire
Except the sage, who only could
Prefer the sacrificial fire.

13

THE EAR OF THE SLOTH

The people have been told and told and told
Ever since the beginning.
Heaven spoke for eternity
When it gave the score to Moses.
Confucius taught from the fount
And deathless echoes rode the centuries.
Plato tended a garden next door to the temple
And the sunflower of virtue shed seed round the sphere.
Cicero laid siege to paradise

With nine arrows of truth.*
Christ came with the key;
The lock was frozen.
Lincoln spoke from the heart
And marched with the angels.
Bellamy strove to hasten the dawn;
The multitude slumbered.
Wells beat a drum
Till the grass came creeping.
Shaw burnished a lamp
Which lighted far corners.
Debs, Hardie, Woodsworth, Bevan
And a cordon of voices that girdled the earth
Spoke to the wind.
Clearly and imperishably
The word has resounded
With trumpet notes searching
The farthestmost reach of the land and the waters;
And, like sloths in the jungle,
We hang upside down from the tree of inertia;
Forgetting all we have heard,
Greeting the sunrise with third-rate desires
And wondering
(Giver of Light, how we wonder!)
What power over matter will loosen our clutch;
And waiting,
Waiting
For one who remembers
The way to the uplands,
Where beauty and wisdom foregather
And attest to the worth of our days.

*Men are born in order to assist one another

PROFIT AND LOSS

Ten thousand bales of goods were made
And countless thousands more;
The profits gild a paradise
Along a tropic shore.

The people cry for hospitals
And housing for the poor,
But Plutus tongues an iron command
In accents loud and dour.

Have mercy, Light, and concentrate
Upon the mind in chains
That labors, not to free itself
But to ensure its pains.

15

THE DELTA

Time was when there was scope for every man
To toil and share the glitter in the pan,
And bells rang out. How pleasant was the shade
Which recompensed the ache and blest the glade
Where plenty dwelt, and hearts were undistressed
By drear anxieties to quell the zest.
Earth's dream was rich with visioned wealth and soon
A waking would occur and grant the boon
To all who labored in sweet order's field
That each might savor the abundant yield.

But time defers and knowledge fails the pace
That speeds the wisdom and achieves the grace.
Dissension rises and bestirs a dust
Which clouds the judgment and misleads the trust.
When leaders stray and lose the common touch
The meek have little and the rest too much.
The horn is servant to the ruling hand
And dull ears harken to a stone command
To tend the cattle that demean the shrine,
And purge heretics who disown the kine.
Powers that bluster in cold Heaven's sight
Condone the plunder and deny the right
To thrive by labor and to share the thing
Which Nature offers that the heart may sing.
The dark has pilfered what the light revealed

And Plutus swaggers in a ravished field.
The shoot that flourished in a lost estate
Now seeks the raindrop in an arid fate.

The smiling river which coursed on with glee
To join the waters of an unknown sea
Now owns an apathy that slows an age
And bares its image on a sickly page.
The sum of living now is borne along
To shape a delta and submerge the song
That tells of virtue in a hopeful way
And urges gropers to a richer day.
A primal monster with an ugly aim
Bestrides the delta and upholds the shame
While wisdom founders in a depthless mire
Which wrests a bounty from a wrong desire.
How foul the guidance which persuades the nose
To relish odors that make ill the rose.

Fleet be the joy when law ensures the pain
And justice stands aside to pleasure gain.
The captains come and go and chiefs depart,
But custom perseveres and blights the mart;
Too slim the wallet and too high the cost;
The pomp but squanders what the labor lost.
A heritage denied is man's disgrace
And prompts sad Heaven to avert its face.
See now the wavelets lapping at pale lips
While fortune hacks a log and offers chips
To rescue those who struggle in a flood
That flows to spread the virus in the blood.

Behold the delta in a grayish light
Where black makes union with unwilling white
And misdeeds prosper in a river's silt
That smears the swimmer and reveals the guilt.
A phantom vessel rides the waves of time
And plucks the favored from the roiling grime.
The rest tread water and repair the hope

Some whim of fortune will provide a rope
To tow them onward in a gilded wake
That lures the seeker, and inspires the ache
To win bright passage to a port of ease
Where harsh winds peter to a soothing breeze.
Let vain aspirants importune the skies —
The ship in the delta is scant in size.
When reason wavers and defaults the deed
The whole earth trembles for the human need.

Turn now, sweet wind, and sweep the delta clean
And cool the temper that impairs the sheen.
Disperse the mist where muddy currents flow,
Fill out the sail, give all mankind a tow.
Blow peace and love where angry water seethes
And joyously wherever virtue breathes.
Bring us soft music to abate our sighs
And grace to win what shadowland denies;
Reclaim the sky: dispel the black and gray,
Break out the sun that it may show the way.

16

PROBLEM

This crisscross tempest, this brawling of waters
bursting the levee to deepen the bog,
and thinning the patience of time;
this futile chase: pursuing the aniseed of illusion,
loud with the expectancy of braying brethren
scenting the green hill;
this feast of the gullible savoring promises
and disgorging the splinters of marrowless bones;
hell wakes refreshed by slumber
which hungers the meek and sustains the custom —
as money arms the knave and nature endows the cheat
with the guile of the fox and the aim of the weasel;
for the skin and the can are testaments to manipulation
and the measure of wisdom that comforts the soul
with the down of the bird and the juice of the tree.

Surely the gods are shivered
by the depth of the night
and the chill of the dawn
that comes over the rim
like ghostly fingers grappling vainly
with the black hordes of history.

Behold the nightshade of iniquity
flowering in soil
that casts up the heavenly seed.
I would suffer the nail and thorn
to bring health to the garden;
but my exhortations to the tribe
would be as echoes in a deserted canyon;
neither would my anguish move the bleak mountain,
nor lower its stature,
nor stay the fall of the multitude
bearing banners to the precipice.
Yet there is comfort and justice in the universe:
defection rides pillion with the will that preserves the folly
while the goodness of the earth is secured
like corroding treasure on the floor of the sea.
Not till the mountain crumbles
and the sun stands forth
shall the world come to understanding
and make the broad gesture.

17

THE SPECK AND THE GLORY

First was the speck motionless in space;
the Will within it stirred
and the speck found union in dust
and spun as a fiery ball;
the heavens breathed and the ball cooled
and out of the mist Earth was come.
The sun wrought and the clouds begat the waters;
the Hand rested and Law took eminence
and the Spirit was present in every leaf and creature,

in the core of the earth and the snow on the mountain.
Nature strove and abundance was as a bright look
on a countenance of many moods.
The sea conceived and a spinal mite emerged
to crown the crawl and pulse a miracle,
and life was sweet in the kernel.

Virgin in aim and whole in heart,
men shared with one another
and assisted one and all over the torn places;
and the breast was closed to the poison-tooth
which divides and corrupts
and blights the tree of generations.
Light shone and man stood out,
like a shaft of hope on a sad hill,
as the seeker of knowledge and keeper of wisdom;
and the Giver of all took heart, being pleased with His works
and the good in store for the imaged ones.

Yet among the many there rose up the few
who were more advanced in guile
and bitten deep with desire
to seek the cool of the glade
while the toilers tilled the fields;
and a dark spirit grew upon them
with the stealth of serpents,
till greed bore witness
to huge claims in luscious valleys
and power to hoard
and deny abundance.
When Reason spoke Ignorance reared
and strife dimmed the way which is upward.
The men of guile,
being as beasts that waylay their own hearts,
clothed cunning customs in comely cloaks;
so that more and more of the mean in spirit
and faint in faith
became as kneelers before stones
and doers of that which is pleasing to idols.

Thus it came to pass that Reason
was as a gagged tongue in a loud confusion.
With their statue-eyes blank to the gleam,
the men of guile acquired legal dominion
and grew strong in arms
and as the knife's edge in vigilance,
and stopped the mouths of all who were stern set
and spoke out against thieves.
Pleas and arguments were as petty blows to granite
and the Earth walked round the sun full many times
while justice dwelt in a never land
and hope was sore in the breast.
A growl went up
and the toilers put down their spades
and went forth with pinched stomachs and empty hands
to battle for just portions
and places to lay their heads.
But the guileful ones,
being fat in resource and paupered in mercy,
assembled legions of hirelings who struck foul blows
till the hungry fell, or cringed
and limped to their labors.
Such was the harvest of storm:
lo, Goodness, which braves the blast afoot,
and Evil, which rides it down
hurrahing the sins of centuries.
Yet Nature throve and the grain of the field
and the fruit of the bough shed tears
while Love stood famished;
and harmony became as a log that flames and smoulders
and doles its warmth to them that shiver.

O world that wilts and knows not its strength!
O world that clutches and treasures wrong things!
Law has its rendezvous with time
and brims a crater which spills a vengeance
more mysterious and just
than molten belchings of fiery mountains.
Behold in this present how ills have bred

a godless horde that strives for eminence
in the sand that is quick and merciless,
and challenges the hosts who chant with double-tongues
and exhibit their souls while temple walls shudder.
Twin evils are but offspring of the pit that flames
and burns the years
to heap the ashes of illusion.

What but the love can stay the claw that rends?
O spurned and saddened power!
take rise, persist, persuade, however long;
dethrone, destroy this snarling shape
which bares its fangs within
and halts that joining men despair of, or disdain.
With gory stroke disowned
how shall the peaceful ones make end of slaughter;
must those who salvage hope from savage seas
disfigure their own brows, like Cain,
and come to shipwreck in the wake of victory?

There is a consciousness of misted things
no mind may probe entire,
a knowingness that cometh whence no thought may clothe,
yet in the dream reveals
a world where ignorance eateth up its root
and knowledge births a bliss.
Let Christ and Lincoln walk again
in leadership which treads a stainless rim
and liberates sad science that it may yet bestow
one half the mind and strength it pawns for arms
on bright research
and fit blank walls with doorless frames;
and half to that which lighted art communicates
and time hands on.
Out of the riven black will burst a glory
which shall consume the doubt
and light the trek to the rich mountain,
where wisdom pours a golden avalanche
and clears all debts away

save that to Him that raises all men up
that they may stand above the vain pursuit
and in the thirsting here and now
achieve a verdant unity.

18

STATUS QUO

Will you never understand
why I pity your works
and despise your complacency?
Is it beyond the wits of the tribe
to share the revolt
which outshone the star?
Light spoke from a hilltop,
but the chief and the clod
with the green crackle in their ears
munch the sweets of illusion.

Shall I tell you of the time
when I forsook the slumber —
when you locked the gate
and sent the shorn ones home
to crush the joy on children's faces,
and contemplate the stone that stunned.
Shall I tell you of the marauder
fierce with a ballpoint,
who assessed a phantom value
and exacted larger tribute
from a soup-bone
cleaner than a buzzard's effort
on a desert floor?

Would you believe
that your arrogance
furnished fuel for the lamp?
You should have burned the libraries
and preserved the ashes
to adorn the brows of the uninstructed.
In the street of gropers

I discovered a radiance
under an arch
which led to a path up a mountain.
I borrowed freely from the ages
to make bright the journey;
and truth exhaled,
dispelling harmful vapors.

The cycle goes round and round,
like folly in orbit,
and aspires to eternity.
Your garments are strained
with the fat of your ribs.
You are ripe with resource
for a plumed advance
to beget a future
which will look back upon
the present
as a faithless age
that jilted wisdom
to embrace a strumpet.
You are stout in arms to march on need,
but the banner is folded
and the route deserted —
except
for footsore ranks
and a few skirmishers
who repair to the mercy of the shadows
to scrape their eyes,
and lament with the sun
the impenetrable grottoes
that house the Establishment.

THE MONKEYS' ELECTION

A host of monkeys hunkered 'round
To hear the party chiefs expound
Momentous issues.

A big baboon, who knew the score,
Dwelt luringly upon the lore
Of more bananas.

The monkeys rose with happy cheers;
Reserving dirty looks and jeers
For the dissenters.

For some, it seemed, were more regaled
With news of coconuts, and wailed
Their high disfavor.

This monkey-shine awoke unrest
In many, whose experience stressed
A plenitude of neither.

Unorganized, the hungry clan
Could only sit and sourly scan
Sculduggery in action.

On voting day, with verdict sealed,
Five years too late the monkeys squealed;
Lamenting fate, and dreams

Of bigger nuts and better fruit,
Of leisure born of evil's root
And more auspicious weather.

LEMON IN THE COFFEE

So, lusty swaggerer,
you are here again
to slay my rest
and foist upon the human race
another witless day;
lugging the victim from the down
to plod and prowl
and snatch and growl,
and pry three squares from nature's clutch —
for what?
If I had sense I'd turn my back
and court again the velvet black
that comforts me.
What know you of the creaks and aches
that ape perennials
and flourish in my bones;
the ghastly din that splits my ears
when you and your remote control
bestir the pestiferous clock
that rives the bliss with stealthy shock,
nor gives me time to scratch my hives
before I rise to grab, and miss, the worm.
Your baleful eye betrays a spleen
that wilts the locks of hag and queen
and wrecks goodwill all down the line;
hauling me forth to climb a hill
(when all the time I might lie still)
so that I may slide down again
to where I was
and fumigate my soul against your foul return.
A man might better dig a hole
and emulate the happy mole
that knows the boon of endless night.
How often you have sweltered me
while I, fool ox, toiled in the field.
You burn my face and parch my throat

and sear the corn and scorch the oat.
You snatch the moisture from the earth
and from the sea that gave us birth,
and boil the dream in vinegar.
If you had wit you'd poke your nose
down where the loot-tree sprouts and grows
and root it out.

Someday I aim to light a fuse
which shall retrieve what you abuse
and blow you high.

But as for now, I trade in woe,
dispelling one that two may grow;
and look for dusk to nip your tail
as you skulk down behind the hills,
so that I may return to bed
to stretch my toes in ecstasy
and dream that you are dead.

'Twixt fire and ice there's little choice,
but still the world might well rejoice
if it could settle for the rain
and never see your mug again —
you misbegotten offspring of the skies!

BOOT AND STRAP

Put down the book of fool pretense
and look at life with knowing eyes;
observe the sweated round
that aches the fibre
and measures the success with ciphers:
these unpretentious ones, these toilers
whose joys are those of passers-by
who glimpse a pleasant scene;
whose prospects deck a future
with traitor skies of promise.
How profitless the whirl of fate,

which, like the potter's wheel,
spins on to doomed objectives:
pot or flesh
the clay returns to clay.

In this drenched world
brave blooms forever spring
to wither in the salty drop eternally:
the phantom hoard eludes pursuit
and dreams become as vacant rinds
that wait the scavenger.
Brainwashed, and unaware
his span is shaped to haggard ends,
the toiler props the dike
till silent waters overflow
and he is borne resistlessly
to founder on the reef of age
and limp ashore
to comb the beach of drear privation.
Denuded, scrapped,
in this abundant land
fate deeds a narrow place
and grants at cost
the charity of peace and silence.

O you! who from the cushioned height
look down with scorn
upon the driven ones
crowding
the rutted track to leaner pastures
with bared fangs of necessity
flashing at their heels;
you who dice the public loaf
and split the winedrop
in unholy eucharist,
you who spray the coat impeccable
and consecrate a structure
strewn with bones

and little wisps of wool;
what say you to the cry:
O sheep and lamb!
was it for this He made thee?

How shall it be with master minds
when willing hands are tied
and the bright earth becomes as wilderness?
What will they rule when chaos strikes
and each is on his own?
Shall bread and wealth and power
pour from the frigid void
or vanish with the workmen?
Who then will bend to other wills
and serve the dark assassin:
this lust of self, these sickly fears,
these daggers wild of hate and violence?
Shall leaders fall upon themselves
and numbers dwindle to a lone survivor?
King of a fruitless earth,
what hand or thought will comfort him
when naught but growls erupt from the computer?

I hear my name
and undertones from upper reaches:
"Dull ox,
come lick your nose
and bend an ear,
nor fret about the manger.
We shall preserve the slob —
these dupes and clods and serfs —
lest heaven tumble,
and we shall soothe their pains:
contain their wits with brews and sports
and drama's scourings,
and grant them precious dreams
of shiny cans with bubble tops
and mansions

more vivid than the stars
that light the eyes of children.

“Let there be credit
more plentiful than all the flakes of winter,
great mounds of debt, yea, higher than the Rockies,
with bright new pinnacles of bold per cent
and rocket flights of taxes.
And let the grip be firmer on the bootstrap
that all who tug may well contrive
to lift their gaze, if not their feet,
and see the lovely trees
that hide the morass;
and, verily, as Heaven’s hand malingers
we who drive will prosper.”

Dull ox
impervious to sham.
I switch my tail
and ponder the inevitable day
when the boot outwears the strap
and the straining host comes up
with the shreds of its illusions.

22

FLIGHT TO GLORY

Consider these, the night-bound birds,
roosting like drowsy fowls on sagging boughs;
dreaming of bat-hung grottoes
instead of skies reserved for larks
and pinnacles of splendor.
Wake! songless ones;
'tis better to dare flight to nowhere
than peck drug-laden corn.
Take off, while heaven holds its breath
and hell prepares the fowling-piece,
and exercise atrophied wings;
attend the cluttered throat
till rich untrammelled tones

break wild and sweet and clear,
like silver chimes caroling the federation;
before God-gifted powers depart
and ravens come to croak disdain
and turn away from that inglorious perch
where songs unuttered swell the guilty silence.

23

CRITERION

Poet, is it success you crave:
the fame emblazoned in a woven sky,
that tinsel spiders may outsheen the sun
and waken world acclaim.
Walk, then, not on the mountain
but in the foothills and the fen.

Discard the snowy robe,
strike up the lyre and tell of ecstasy —
of eager probe and hungry aperture.
'Tis all that matters if
you would be touted literary
and qualify for squandering the grant —
puffing long perfectos on sunny decks —
and filching laurels.

Reck not of cherry stains that smear the lily
or honor's drought that droops the rose;
the nightshade and the mandrake flourish.
Distil the mash with passion's heat
and drench the page.

Attend the credo that denies the light:
there is no one above who cares,
who sees or overhears;
no pathway to the peak of bliss
except the route flesh offers.
Seize fast the moment and indulge

the contact, for it is all
that man may steal from doom
to vindicate the perfumed life
of this unsullied age.

Fear not the clod with the extinguisher;
there are no unchaste words
in lust's pure lexicon,
no need to douse the darting flame;
the fire is self-consuming.
The fault is in the stomach
of him that retches at the savory salad
and disgorges on the way
to levels unachieved by minks and rabbits.
Seek, then, for beauty in the open house
where life's creative burst goes down the drain,
and speed the pen.

Do this and you will have it made
till time's forgetfulness
shall sink the grave the deeper
that stifled grass may breathe again
and virtue's pansy lift its face
to dew that is the sweeter.

ACHOO!

I seek a more rewarding note
Than flows from song bereft of sense;
I'd rather own a silent throat
Than offer man no recompense.

These busy bards who burnish junk,
For which dazed critics have no name,
And proffer it as art (what bunk)
But trade the height for lesser fame;

While others spray a sneezing gas
That racks the blossom on the bough,
Repelling the discerning mass
Who seal the purse and cry, "Enow!"

Scrawled walls are pure as lily-white
Compared to parish snipes who run
Their gutter course without respite
Till sewers burst and drown the sun.

Roll out my jet and let me go
And fuel it well for I shall need
Great thrust at supersonic speed
To leave this fen so far below

That I shall never make it back,
Nor sulk with Oscar when his stare
Takes in the bounding apish pack
Purveying stench beyond compare.

25

DOWN, SIR!

Hark to the yowler in N.B.
That scanneth with a grudge;
He'd be a wiser dog if he
Were not so learned a judge.

26

MINUS TWO

She went to church with the top half missing,
The devil danced when he heard the hissing,
The pure ones stared till they courted blindness;
Then the lights went out. It was a kindness.

The walls were stretched, but there was no service;
The future swarmed and made me nervous.
The ear confirmed what the wits mistrusted
When a small voice said, "My V-string's busted."

Then somebody prayed for light in darkness
The better to view the rounded starkness.
The plea was met and, oh, what a dither!
The nymph was gone and the parson with her.

27

MAGIC IN THE MIST

Wake, fellow-members;
Let us walk in the sun
with our toes to the treasury
and exhibit our virtue:
let us double our take
and bring cheer to the aged
with a peanut gesture.
Let us fear not the day of wrath,
nor delay the inspired levy;
for the pale ones are short in future
and lean in memory
and the anger withers
even as the bounty fades
in the heavenly mist that screens the magician,
who retrieves with the left hand
what the right hand dispenses.
But for us 'tis a mellow season;
let us bankrupt our hearts at no cost
and offer up thanksgiving
in the hallowed light of a just equation.

28

OF GUARDIANS AND THE ESTABLISHMENT

Behold the chosen who exalt the loan
Of power to govern and divide the bone.
A day to legislate, a week to stray
In search of rectitude at higher pay.
Night without end they croon a hazy song
And fiddle mightily with right and wrong:

A hut for oldsters, an estate for rooks,
A twig for heroes, monuments for crooks;
No peak, no vision, a divided house
With status frozen like a glacial mouse;
Success equated with prestige and loot
And sad trees weeping over shrivelled fruit;
Truth outmaneuvered by the foes of thought
And ignorance cheering while banners rot.

Yea, Lord, they praise thee for the temple rout,
Then sprint to the altar where tape runs out.

29

DIRGE FOR A BYTOWN WARRIOR

Advance to the rear, malingerer —
you with your back to the line
and your chest to the decoration;
the unfought battle is over,
the banners are feasting the moth
and the shoddy is late at the mill.

You and the thud and the silent echo;
you had prime years to part the mountain
and lead the march; but behold
the nibbling gait: munching juicy grasses,
like a truant horse trailing the traces,
while a nation stared at the waiting plow;
stubborn years with a tack hammer
shoring a house which comes apart
and stirs a dust that grieves the sun;
even though the people groaned
and winter moaned in the chimney
and the gaunt hearth heaped no ashes.

Forward to your memoirs
and a slab in the stillness,
where only stars may weep and overhear
your apologies for a rusted sceptre.
May the winds of change bring sweetness

and dispel the memory
and give life to halted feet and muted drums,
oh, shielder of the guilty
and defender of the stolen pasture.

30

THE ABSENTEES

See now the truant ones who gender hurt
And personate the insect in the shirt
Of shirked affairs and miseries of State,
Pursuing hidden seams while duties wait;
Fleeing like stowaways from docking ships
When private itches burn to rake more chips
And pleasure's call is heard above the drone
Of dullness which gives stress to Hansard's tone.
How, then, shall effort win a brighter round
And loyalty tongue notes of sweeter sound
Than absent trumpeters have ever blown,
Or sprout a richer seed than self has sown;
Or virtue garnish history with spells
Of love's release from undefeated hells?

The green men mass full eighteen thousand strong
To halt the forward thought and to prolong
The frittered day of idle hope, and ban
The grand march of integrity to span
A world transformed; and spare man from the rim
Where he jumps off in evil hours so grim
Pale faith retires to medicate her wounds
While reason scans a tortured earth and swoons.
'Tis not the traitored task alone that screams
When fugitives trade down for lesser gleams.

31

O SILENT DRUM!

Lord, what a heaven earth would be
If those who call the turn
Would head the march on poverty
And tilt the gravy urn.

IF THIS BE ALL

If this be all, this bilking and this butting,
 This parching urge for place;
 How cool the night that cometh with the shutting
 Of silk in narrow space.

If this be all, the height is but the measure
 Of the descent we make
 When withered clutch relinquishes the treasure
 It strove for — to forsake.

REQUIEM FOR JUSTICE

I shall not weep for those who serve the gloom
 And spurn the light
 That they may prosper till the fated boom
 Reveals its plight.

Nor shall I weep for those who reach the peak
 And blaze with class
 Only to tumble farther than the meek
 To nourish grass.

I save my tears for those, who, like the ox,
 Obey the prod,
 Viewing the depredations of the fox
 And chiding God.

NIGHT AT SEA

Empress that drifts in circles where spumed rocks
 Abound and wait, the storm persists. The night
 Holds not a single star. The engine balks
 And gales of rancor buffet you. Your plight
 Stirs not a whisper of remorse. The trough
 Grows deep, the mast is dipped in the unknown.
 A seam has opened and the power is off;
 The yacht has passed and you are on your own.

Pale harmony is torn with discontent,
The leaf forlorn droops in dissension's air;
No song is heard save one that makes lament
For leadership that fails the silent prayer.
Who now will rise and take the wheel and press
Forever on to seas that make redress?

35

IMPAIRED DRIVER

Remorseless, he pursued self-seeking ways.
Ungrateful for the breath of life, his praise
Withheld, his ears estranged from sighs within,
Enthralled with place and fame, at ease with sin;
High fortune rode with him. His wish was law
Until the fog unwrapped him and he saw
Too late the ice that spun him round and round
To find a solitude in narrow ground.

DISTILLED VERSE

36

GOLDEN MEAN

More for the few, nil for the queue.

37

hoodlum

debased . . . erased

38

SECURITY

"Go away, worm!"

39

WHEN?

(labor song)

When shall we see the beauty
of the ancient truth
that trails the throng so patiently —

we who keen the dark,
or live apart,
or turn away.
The night is our undoing
and our hollow hearts
shut out the echo.

When shall we stir to wisdom's touch
and shed these covers of indifference
that corrupt our bones?
Are we forever brother to the clod?
Piecemeal the bloodless monster
devours the castaways of fortune:
these scrapped ones
whose woe is ours tomorrow.
Conditioned, we author our own harm;
debt's spectre struts in borrowed robes
that cloak the snare
and there is small escape.
Yet we are vast in numbers
and our strength, unused,
is as the movement of the sea.
Come let us leave the darkling ship
and strike out for a new land
where progress marches in the sun
and rackets perish in the snows of virtue;
let us storm the granite heights
that prop the cloud
and the glory that was Dunkirk
will be as a single flash of guidance
on the hidden stair.

Hear me now —
the shirkers and the groppers —
the monster's jaws crunch louder with each day
and its leer predicts a future
where dust inters the dream.
Yet you cry:
"Go scrub your wits, foolish one;

the politicians will reform, come sunup,
and woe will disappear."

I tell you the candle sputters
in the night wind
and the dawn will leave dark shadows
on the land and on our faces.
You have tuned out truth,
but me you shall not silence;
for I will speak from the highest tower
and from the grass that covers me.
In the still of the night
when you toss
and fear the morrow,
in the press of the day
when you strive for half a loaf,
at the close of the year
when you ponder the sagging scale
and the aging tree,
in your prayers when you cry out
and wake no answer;
when the gate is locked
and the unjust hour is upon you
it is me you will hear
calling, begging, urging, prodding
you
to marshal the power of the spirit,
which dwells in the eternal
and is death to the lie,
and go forth in full strength
that life may be worth the breathing
and the boon worth the effort
and the sacrifice.

Throughout the earth
the brass heart looks down on you
as those of small account.
But you are builders and makers
with sceptres for the reaching

and the divine in your essence,
with untold potential
to round out the miracle that is life
and be keeper of all your affairs.

Get with it and surpass the ant,
you with the hopes that die in your faces,
you who stand and lift up your praises
to solidarity
and sit down on your hands
with the lead crushing them to numbness,
you who bow to a rod
and plead with a stone
that has no answers.

Stand by with the heart that prances,
yea, even to prison
and the ultimate agony,
and assist one another.
Come with your swarms of metal birds,
come with your ships and amphibians
and your little boats innumerable,
your rafts and your spars
with purposed shapes clinging,
and your reserves of valor;
for the beachead that calls is demanding
as a foothold in paradise.
Nor fear that in unity
there is wasteland
but a crop that matures
with all things needful
to a shining security.

But what do I hear from the dockside and the hills —
a great murmur and brave shouts,
or a chiding from the bog?
'Go scrub your wits, foolish one;
the politicians will reform, come sunup,
and woe will disappear.'





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Adams, Percy Miller
Song of the scorpion

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